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ABSTRACT

College students were asked to recall experiences of success and of failure from their own lives, and to indicate what they believed to be the reasons for success or failure. Results indicated that (1) women were more likely than men to attribute success to effort; (2) men attributed success to luck more often than women; (3) women had more pride after success than men; (4) women attributed failures to lack of ability more often than men; (5) all subjects generally attributed success to ability and effort more than to luck and task difficulty; and (6) androgynous women attributed success more often to ability and had higher future expectations after success than sex-typed females. The finding that men made more attributions to luck than women differs from most previous research on this theme. Such a difference may be due to reliance on recall of past life experiences for purposes of this study, rather than on laboratory tasks utilized by other researchers. (Author/MJL)

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Attributions for Success and Failure in Subjectively Recalled Life Experiences: The Effects of Sex and Sex Role Identity

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Attributions for Success and Failure in Subjectively Recalled Life Experiences: The Effects of Sex and Sex Role Identity

Margaret Mead has stated that women are unsexed by success, and men are unsexed by failure. Much of the research on achievement in women has explored internal and external barriers to success. These barriers are likely to be especially debilitating for women who have most strongly internalized the sex role stereotype of femininity. On the other hand, women with a strongly feminine sex role identity may not even attempt to achieve in tasks traditionally considered to be masculine. Research suggests that these women avoid cross sex behaviors, avoid achievement, and inhibit performance in competitive situations (Bem, 1974; Alper, 1973; Dickstein and Brown, 1974). Stein and Bailey have argued that women who are highly motivated to achieve either redefine or expand their definition of femininity to include achievement (Stein and Bailey, 1975).

The Fear of Success research (Horner, 1974) at first seemed promising, because it focused on the problems of achievement for women, and attempted to explain why women did not fit the predictions of the Expectancy-Value theory of achievement motivation. Fear of Success was interpreted as reflecting both internal and external barriers to achievement (Horner, 1974; Monahan, Kuhn, and Shaver, 1974; Feather and Raphelson, 1973; Condry and Dyer, 1976).

Horner's (1974) operational definition of Fear of Success included some components of cognitive attributions, such as attributing the success to luck. Weiner (1974) has suggested that what is currently operationally defined in the literature as achievement motivation may be the result of

learned patterns of attributions for success and failure. The four causal explanations used most often by subjects are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Males high in achievement motivation attribute success to their own ability and effort more than males low in need for achievement.

Research focusing on sex differences in attributional patterns has found that after success, men make more attributions to their own ability than women, and women make more attributions to luck than men (Feather, 1969; Frieze, 1975; Deaux, 1976; Levine, Reis, and Turner, 1976).

For failure, results have been conflicting. Women may cite external factors such as luck to explain failure (Feather, 1969), but most of the research suggests that women attribute failure to lack of ability more often than men (Crandall, Katkovsky, and Preston, 1962; Nicholls, 1975; Deaux, 1976). The person and situation variables which differentially affect attributional patterns for women have begun to be explored (Frieze, 1975; Fontaine, 1976).

Much of the research on sex differences in attributions for success and failure has been based on laboratory tasks, such as anagrams or digit symbol tasks, or else stimuli designed to elicit conflict between femininity and achievement. Undeniably, these conflicts and barriers, both internal and external, do exist for women. The present study was designed in an attempt to eliminate both explicit and implicit barriers for women from the research model. Laboratory task situations may be reflecting sex differences in anxiety, or may be affected by women's lower generalized expectancies in a novel task situation (Crandall, 1969; Montanelli and Hill, 1969).

The present study examined sex differences in attributions for

success and failure in recalled life experiences. Attributional patterns for sex-typed and androgynous women were also examined.

Subjects

Subjects were 825 college students from 12 New York City area colleges. Data was collected in a classroom setting, and subjects participated voluntarily. 555 of the subjects were women, and 270 were men. 158 (19%) of the subjects were Black, Hispanic, or Oriental. The average age for women was 22.7 years, and the average age for men was 22.4 years.

Socio-economic status of the subjects varied from the lower to the middle classes.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to participate in a study of success and failure in college students, and were given questionnaires to fill out. The first page of the questionnaire was the Bem Sex Role Identity Scale (Bem, 1974). (On the BSRI, which consists of 60 items, subjects receive a Masculinity score, a Femininity score, and a T-ratio score, based on the difference between Masculinity and Femininity scores, and adjusted for the standard deviations.) Next, all Ss were asked to recall an experience of success and an experience of failure from their own lives, and to write about these experiences and the reasons for the success and failure.

Half of the Ss were instructed to recall experiences in a competitive situation, and the other half of the Ss were instructed to recall experiences in a non-competitive situation. The order of success-fail and competitive-non-competitive instructions was randomized. The instructions for the success-competitive situation were as follows:

Try to recall a task or experience in your life in a competitive situation in which you succeeded. This might be any experience in which you had a feeling of success. In the space below, describe the experience, and describe what you think are the reasons for the success.

Next, Ss were asked to attribute the success and fail experiences separately on a scale of 1 to 7 according to the amount of ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck, or lack thereof, contributing to each. The order of presentation of the 4 attribution scales was randomized. Then each S responded to questions about future expectations in the same task and amount of positive or negative affect experienced after each task.

Analysis Of Data

Success and Fail situations were analyzed separately. Each was a 2X2X2 design with Sex, Sex Role Identity, and Competition as factors. Sex Role Identity was defined by a median split for each sex based on the T-ratio score on the Bem Scale. Male and female subjects were labeled as either sex-typed or androgynous. The Competition factor was defined by instructions given to Ss to recall either competitive or non-competitive success and fail experiences.

Using a hierarchical stepdown analysis (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, and Bent, 1975), a multivariate F was obtained for each main effect and interaction. Univariate F's were computed for each of the 6 dependent variables (attributions to ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck; future expectations; affect). Subjects who failed to respond to any one of the dependent variables were deleted from the analyses reported here.

T-tests were computed for each of the dependent variables for sex-typed and androgynous females. All subjects who responded to each dependent variable were included in this analysis.

Results

In the Success situation, the multivariate F was significant for the main effect of Sex ($F = 4.14$; $p < .001$). Two of the univariate F's reflected significant differences between male and female subjects. Women had significantly more pride after success than did men ($F = 16.05$; $p < .0001$). Women also made more attributions to effort as a cause of success than did men ($F = 4.12$; $p < .05$). Male subjects attributed success to luck more often than female subjects, although this trend was not quite significant ($F = 3.66$; $p < .06$).

In the Failure situation, the multivariate F was again significant for the main effect of Sex ($F = 4.76$; $p < .0001$). Women attributed their failures to lack of ability more often than men ($F = 9.63$; $p < .01$), while men attributed failures more often than women to bad luck ($F = 15.07$; $p < .001$).

For the interaction of Sex and Sex Role Identity, univariate F's were significant in the Success situation for the dependent variables of ability ($F = 9.15$; $p < .01$), task difficulty ($F = 6.42$; $p < .05$), luck ($F = 8.46$; $p < .01$), future expectations ($F = 3.89$; $p < .05$), and affect ($F = 7.65$; $p < .01$). In the Failure situation, the Sex by Sex Role Identity interaction produced significant F's for the dependent variables of lack of ability ($F = 7.23$; $p < .01$) and task difficulty ($F = 3.86$; $p < .05$).

These interactions reflect in part a number of differences between sex-typed and androgynous women. Two-tailed T-test comparisons between

sex-typed and androgynous women showed that androgynous women attributed success more often to their own ability ($t = -2.33$; $p < .05$), and had higher future expectations after success ($t = -2.79$; $p < .01$). Sex-typed women attributed successes more often than androgynous women to having had a simple task ($t = 2.25$; $p < .05$), and sex-typed women attributed failure more often to lack of ability ($t = 2.83$; $p < .01$).

Concluding Remarks

In the free recall task situation of the present study, women were more likely than men to make internal attributions for life experiences of success, and women reported much more positive affect after success than did men. Men made more attributions to luck than women (although this was a not-quite-significant trend). This pattern is the reverse of that found in most previous attribution research (Levine, Reis and Turner, 1976; Frieze, 1975; Deaux, 1976). However, the greater internal attributions by women (especially to effort) and more positive reported affect after success is consistent with the attribution theory prediction that stronger internal attributions lead to more positive affect after success (Weiner, 1974).

An inspection of the data suggests that in general, attributions for all subjects repeat the pattern found in previous attribution research - all subjects made more attributions to ability and effort in the success situation than they did to luck and task difficulty (Weiner, 1974). The failure of the present study to replicate previous research on sex differences in attributions for success may be related to the task situation, which was recalled life experiences. There are several factors which may

account for the inconsistency with previous results. The first factor influencing results may be that of time. Subjects recalled experiences in the recent and distant past, and the lapse of time from task to attribution may affect attributional patterns. Most of the past research has measured subjects' attributions immediately after performance of a task in the laboratory. A second factor which may be influencing results is differences in types of tasks recalled by male and female subjects. Subjects may have recalled role consistent tasks, or subjectively "easy" or "difficult" tasks. A third factor may be the relative novelty of laboratory tasks, as opposed to life experiences. It is possible, for example, that women have more anxiety in a laboratory task situation. Research on expectancies has indicated that women have lower expectancies of success than men on a novel task, though not necessarily on a task in which there is prior experience (Crandall, 1969; Montanelli and Hill, 1969). A lower expectancy of success would be logically more likely to lead to an attribution of luck for a successful experience. A fourth factor influencing the results of the present study is that recalled life experiences are likely to be more ego-involving, and are situated within the context of the subject's own life goals and intentions.

Attributions for success to ability and effort, and for failure to lack of effort and sometimes bad luck, have been found to be related to high achievement motivation and better performance in males (Weiner, 1974). The assumption has been made that these are healthier and more adaptive patterns. If this is so, the results of the present study suggest that in explaining the causes of life experiences, women have more adaptive patterns than men

in successful situations (and this is supported by more positive reported affect for women after success). In failure situations, however, women have more debilitating patterns, and tend to attribute failures to a lack of ability much more often than men. Women were more "internal" than men in explaining the causes of both success and failure, while men tended to make more external attributions than women to explain both success and failure.

Sex role identity differences reported for women in the present study suggest that androgynous women had healthier patterns of attributions for both success and failure than did sex-typed women. Bem (1974) has reported that feminine sex-typed women are less willing to engage in cross-sex behaviors. In the present study, however, no conflict between femininity and achievement was imposed on the task, and subjects were free to recall role consistent experiences if they chose to do so. The results of the present study suggest that a strongly feminine sex role identity is associated with more debilitating patterns in explaining the causes of life experiences of success and failure.

If women are unsexed by success, and if women fear success, it may be in part because research has not yet adequately tapped the person and situation variables that facilitate achievement for women. A content analysis of the stories written by subjects in the present study may yield further data for an understanding of the results, and for the generation of new hypotheses. The results of the present study suggest that the study of real life experiences may be an important area of research on achievement and attributional patterns in women.

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Table 1.
Analyses of Variance, Success Condition, Table of F's

Source	Ability	Effort	Task	Luck	Future	Affect
Sex(S)	1.39	4.12*	<1	3.66	< 1	16.05**
Sexrole(R)	<1	<1	1.20	<1	4.16*	<1
Competition(C)	<1	<1	<1	2.59	2.0	1.77
S X R	9.15**	3.82	6.42*	8.46**	3.89*	7.65**
S X C	<1	1.83	<1	<1	2.75	1.98
R X C	<1	<1	<1	1.28	<1	<1
S X R X C	3.17	<1	<1	1.71	1.07	<1

* p <.05
** p <.01

Table 2.
Analyses of Variance, Failure Condition, Table of F's

Source	Ability	Effort	Task	Luck	Future	Affect
Sex(S)	9.63**	2.41	<1	15.07**	1.97	2.15
Sexrole(R)	2.13	<1	1.79	<1	11.31**	<1
Competition(C)	6.06*	2.37	2.65	1.10	<1	<1
S X R	7.23**	<1	3.86*	<1	<1	<1
S X C	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
R X C	<1	2.75	<1	1.04	<1	1.58
S X R X C	<1	1.40	<1	2.51	1.81	<1

* p <.05
** p <.01